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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study analyzed and compared children's participation in book reading activities with their participation in other types of literacy activities. Subjects, 15 bilingual children who were enrolled in a multilingual, multicultural preschool program where English was the common language, were encouraged to maintain their native languages through the presence of native-language tapes, books, and activities. Data included classroom field notes, videotapes, and teacher plans recorded and/or collected over one semester. Results indicated that: (1) the children were not very attentive during the book reading in English that occurred during whole group time; (2) the only children that were being read to in their native languages were the Chinese and Russian children; and (3) the children were actively engaged in other literacy activities, and activities that were not formally designed as literacy activities. Findings underscore the importance of creating opportunities for bilingual children's engagement with print in ways other than English book reading. Children in this classroom with its emphasis on multilingualism demonstrated an emerging awareness of different languages, different conventions of print, and different concepts about print. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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BILINGUAL PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN CLASSROOM LITERACY ACTIVITIES: "ONCE UPON A TIME" AND ITS ALTERNATIVES

In an effort to provide *all* children with opportunities to enhance their emergent literacy development, reading educators (Edwards, 1989; Edwards & García, 1991; García, Pearson, & Jiménez, 1994) have recommended three accommodations for working with students who do not come from a background of parental-child storybook reading. These accommodations include the development of parental-child book reading programs; the creation of rich literacy classroom environments, including extensive teacher-child book reading; and the incorporation of home literacy activities into the classroom. Less attention has been given to the third recommendation than to the other two, probably due to two interrelated reasons: Fewer studies have documented alternative ways in which young children acquire classroom-oriented literacy skills other than through storybook reading, and teachers do not always know how to incorporate and build on these alternative activities.

One reason that storybook reading has been touted as a cornerstone of children's emergent literacy development is that it reflects a major characteristic of monolingual American middle-class children's home literacy background (García, et al., 1994; Heath, 1982; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Also, children who come from backgrounds where they are read to frequently and where they are engaged in parent-child conversations about books seem to do better in American kindergarten and first grade than do other children (Adams, 1990).

The extent to which parental-child storybook reading plays a role in second-language students' emergent literacy development is not well researched. Teachers of second-language students enrolled in all-English settings frequently do not know how to engage these students in storybook reading. Experts in second-language literacy generally recommend that many of the same predictable, repetitive books used with monolingual children can be used with second-language children (Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 1992). However, in doing so, teachers need to use

good English-as-a-second language (ESL) practices (e.g., maintain structure and routine in the storybook activity, use multiple modalities to present the book, and select books that are slightly beyond the students' comprehension) (García, 1994). Even with these practices, however, it is not unusual for beginning ESL students to be inattentive during English book reading (Tsai, 1993). The extent to which they are engaged in book reading in their native language or in other literacy activities (at school or at home) may be the crucial factors that characterize their emergent literacy development.

The purpose of this paper is to report the extent to which bilingual preschool children enrolled in a multilingual, multicultural preschool program participated in classroom literacy activities. The study uses an ethnography of communication framework to analyze and compare the children's participation in book reading activities with their participation in other types of literacy activities.

Methods

Research context. This paper focuses on the first semester of a year-long ethnographic study of 15 bilingual children who were enrolled in a multilingual, multicultural preschool program, where English was the common language. The children were from four general language groups--Chinese (5 students), Russian (3 students), Urdu (4 students), and African (3 students of different African languages). The teacher only spoke English to them, but the children were encouraged to maintain their native languages through the presence of native-language tapes, native-language books, and native-language activities. Family coordinators who spoke the children's native languages were hired for all the language groups, with the exception of two of the three African languages. At least once a week, the family coordinators worked with the children in their native languages in the classroom. They also visited the children's homes and worked with the children and their families on educational activities in their native languages. The teacher aide, who also was the Chinese family coordinator, spoke Chinese with the Chinese-speaking children and English with the rest of the children.

Data source and analysis. Results to be reported here focus on the literacy events documented in the classroom field notes, videotapes, and teacher plans recorded and/or collected during the first semester of the study (August-December). The classroom (2 1/2 hours of instruction) was observed at least once a week by one of three individuals, who used field notes to document the observations. In addition, weekly videotapes were made of classroom instruction, targeting the times when children were likely to engage in literacy activities (free book reading on the carpet; book reading by the teacher, aide, family coordinators, librarian, or students; centers , that involved literacy activities, e.g., a post office center and writing table).

Examples of key literacy events were identified by reading and rereading the field notes and analyzing the videotapes, using an ethnography of communication framework (Saville-Troike, 1989). The literacy events were coded according to the topic or activity observed, the identity of the participants, the language used, the ways in which the participants were involved in directing or carrying out the activity, and what the children's participation in the activity (as documented through the observations and videotapes) revealed about their emergent literacy development. Results were shared with the teacher, and when necessary, the appropriate family coordinator, or teacher aide, so that they could help contextualize the findings and explain the children's interaction or performance in their native language. Throughout the coding and analysis, a constant-comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to delineate major patterns of performance as well as significant variations.

Results

The organization of classroom instruction was influenced by the teacher's belief in a child-centered approach and her goal of helping the students maintain their native languages at the same time that they acquired English and became familiar with American schools. The school day began with the children gathering on a brown carpet as they waited for everyone to arrive. While they were waiting, they looked at books, played games, and very occasionally listened to a story being

read. Then, there was a whole group activity that usually consisted of singing and/or book reading. Next, there was center work, clean-up, and gym or outside play.

The children generally were not very attentive during the book reading in English that occurred during whole group time. Several reasons can be postulated as to why the children were not particularly attentive. First, many of them were not fluent enough in English to understand the books that were being read. Secondly, the teacher often chose books that were informative, but not predictable or repetitive. Sometimes, the print and pictures were small and difficult for the children to see. One reason the teacher gave for not reading more"big books" in the classroom was that she wanted the families to maintain the children's native language proficiency, and did not want to privilege their literacy experiences in English. She explained that her reading approach emphasized an early-childhood project approach (Katz & Chard, 1989) instead of actual storybook reading. Third, the book reading occurred at the beginning of the day as the children entered the classroom. As can be seen in the excerpted transcript of one of the book reading sessions (T = teacher; C = child, with numbers indicating the different children participating), there were frequent interruptions (noted in italics) in the book reading protocol:

9:24 am (Oral reading of book: First Class: The postal system in Action, written and photographed by Harold Roth, 1983).

T: (Sits and holds the book so that it is facing the class. Points to the pictures.) What's this girl doing?

Children respond: Putting her letter in the mail box.

T: What are the people doing?

Children: Putting a stamp.

T: What did she have to do with Shawana's letter? (This is in reference to a post office visit that the children took recently; T is asking C1 about what the postal worker did with one of the student's letters.)

C1: They had a special scale.

T: So they are buying stamps. Where were those big boxes going to?

(Pause, no response.)

T: One came from Japan. One came from Korea. What's this man doing in the post office?

T: Don't sleep Yi-long (child is pretending to be snoring).

(At this time a child who arrives late enters the classroom.)

T: Nikita is here so you can say hi to him.

Children: Hi Nikita.

(Nikita sits down and T returns to reading the story.)

T: What are the people doing?

C2: Judy, what's a zip code?

T: (Explains what a zip code is.) If you don't put a zip code on... T: *Boys you need to sit with your legs crossed. (T and Teacher Aide rearrange two boys.) You guys are bumping your heads.*

(T returns to the reading.)

T: And here's the mail. What is she doing with the box?

C1: Weighing the box.

C2: He's taking out the mail.

C3: The mail. The truck driving and I said goodbye. (Begins to explain what he saw yesterday on the field trip to the post office.)

T: They are doing what we saw yesterday. Look at this. All the mail that they have to sort.

Children: Wow!

T: I can't hear, Hilda. Just a minute.

T: Here they are sorting it again (points to another picture)

T: There's another machine. It checks the cancellation mark. If it's a big package they can't put it in here.

S1: It would be tired.

T: Here they are putting the trays.

C1: Judy, You know, I heard somebody say stupid to me.

T: What should you say?.(directs this question at the student)

(C1 responds and T returns quickly to the story)

C2: Judy, they better get the mail out.

T: Here they are sorting some more of the mail.

(Teacher Aide is translating and talking to one of the students.)

T: They put them on a conveyor belt. You have to package it very well.... Yep, it's a man.

T: (Explains about dead mail.)

T: They are loading it. Look at how full it is.

C2: Oh boy, Judy...

T: Hilda, now is not the time to play with the dolls. You can hold a doll. Just don't play with her.

Although the teacher attempted to acquire as many books as possible in the children's native languages, this was a difficult task. For example, during the month of November, native-language books on display in the classroom included one book in an African language, six books in Chinese, and several books made by the children, with the help of their families or family coordinator, in their native languages. The children were more attentive during the reading of books in their native languages. However, the only children that we observed being read to in their native languages were the Chinese and Russian children. These children were read to in their native languages in small voluntary groups at least once a week.

All of the children went to the library every Friday. Although the librarian read stories to them, she too appeared to use storybook reading as an opportunity to get the students to learn about topics, as well as learn and use English. For example, in a typical 30 minute session, she first used a puppet to encourage the students to sing along with her. Then, she introduced a storybook, eliciting responses from the students by talking through the book rather than reading it, asking the students to "tell me with your words". Half of the students were attentive at the beginning of the session, but became restless toward the end.

Other times when students could read books were during the center time, at the beginning of the day, while waiting for other students to arrive, and at the end of the day when students were getting ready to leave. Few of the students went to the brown carpet to read during center time. They sometimes chose to look at books while the teacher was checking their backpacks. However, this activity was turbulent, with students frequently being interrupted to speak with the teacher.

Despite the children's general inattentiveness during the classroom's book reading time, they were actively engaged in other literacy activities. All of the children were actively engaged in a teacher-child constructed post office center where students wrote letters in English and/or their native languages, mailed them to their families, made and painted mailboxes for their respective language groups. Other teacher-planned literacy activities involved extensive use of the Language Experience Approach, where students' dictated their thoughts (in English and their native languages) about field trips, drawings, or photographs. A writing/art table where students were free to draw and/or write also was present throughout the entire semester.

The children also were involved in activities that were not formally designed as literacy activities. For example, there were three structured classroom management routines that happened to involve literacy. The routines were established by the teacher to help facilitate the management of the class. One of the first routines involved the teacher or teacher aide checking each child's backpack for a message from home. The teacher also used the backpack as an

opportunity to send information home. For example, on 10-27-93 the teacher explained to the children:

> I have this letter to put in your bags. Remember to give this to your mom and dad. The letter tells mommies and daddies how important it is to pick you up after school on the bus. So, how many letters from mommy and daddy?

The children's appropriation of this literacy event perhaps is best illustrated by two of the Pakistani children's interactions. When one of the children encouraged the other one to write a letter to her parents, she said, "Ullâh, you wanna make mail for your parents? Ullah, I'm making mail for my parents."

The second routine involved the children's name tags. The children's name tags were cut into geometric shapes, had their photos on them, and their names printed in English and in their native languages. During the center work, children chose which center they wanted to work in by placing their name tags on a hook in that center. There were only so many hooks in each center, effectively limiting the number of students at any one center. The students quickly realized the symbolic meaning of their name tag and its relationship to their identity. For example, two of the children went to the snack table without their name tags. Before they sat down, another child said to them, "Name tag." The two children smiled and went to the center where they had left their name tags. When the child who had reminded them saw that they had retrieved their name tags, he left the area with a smile, waving at one of the children. Another child, during snack time, looked at her name tag and spelled out her name, "I-L-E-E-N". She then looked for a cup with her name on it in the storage cabinet. Once she found it, she told another child that the cup said, "I-L-E-E-N", spelling out her name.

The third and last routine observed had to do with the snack instructions. During the center work, the children were encouraged to eat their snack whenever they liked (again with the name tag limitation). To guide them, instructions were pasted on the wall above the snack table. For example, on 9/14/93, the instructions said, "Please take 2 pieces of melon", accompanied by a

drawing of two slices of melon. The children paid attention to the writing in the instructions. For example, one of the Chinese girls told a Russian boy, "One more spoon" (suggesting that she could take another spoonful of the snack). The Russian boy, perhaps, not understanding her intent, responded by saying, "Two spoons" as indicated on the instructions. The Chinese girl responded by saying, "Look at the wall", pointing to the picture on the wall. "One, two".

Most of the students were actively involved in writing, sometimes in their native languages, many times in English. Some of the children printed correctly in English. For example, one Chinese girl, Diane, accurately wrote the word "kite" on an envelope on which she had drawn a kite. Another time she asked a student observer how to spell her name, accurately writing down the observer's name, Mary Beth, but incorrectly writing the t as an l, which, when brought to her attention by the observer, she corrected. Other children used invented spelling in English. For example, Jane, another Chinese child, wrote a string of English letters and told Diane in English that she had written, "I love you everywhere". A Russian child wrote something in Russian, gave it to the Chinese aide, and watched her reaction when she pretended to read it. An African child wrote letters on a piece of paper and attempted to tape it to a shelf, imitating the labels placed in the post office center.

Students also demonstrated their emergent literacy in other ways. Several children saw letters in what they were eating or playing with. For example, Jane, a Chinese child picked up a cookie and said to one of the researchers, "Y", the letter that resembled the cookie. Another Chinese child picked up another cookie, and said, "It's like H". When the Chinese aide saw that a group of Chinese children had put blocks in the shape of an English letter, she suggested in Chinese (indicated in capital letters) that they make more letter shapes, "ARE YOU PUTTING THE BLOCKS TO MAKE WORDS? WHICH WORD DOES THIS LOOK LIKE? IT'S LIKE A T." The students then arranged the blocks in the shape of 1, 2, x, and y. In another example from the fieldnotes, a Pakistani child first used English to pretend read a book written in English and then she used Urdu:

> Ullah and Uzma are looking at a shape book. Uzma says, "Brown square, blue circle." Kaleem joins them. Uzma moves away from the other two, and holds up the book as if reading to them. Ullah listens but Kaleem moves away. Uzma then says to the teacher, "Judy, I can read this in my language. The teacher responds, "I can hear you while you're reading. I like it! I never heard anyone read in Urdu before." Uzma continues to read in Urdu.

The children also demonstrated that they were aware of different languages and knew when to use which language with which person. For instance, Jane, a Chinese child, spoke English with Winnie, an African child, and Chinese with Diane, a Chinese child. Hilda, another African child, accurately identified a Chinese record when she said to a group of Chinese children, "That's a Chinese song. Your mommy teach you?" When a different Chinese song was played, the child asked, "Is that another Chinese song, too?"

Educational Importance

The findings underscore the importance of creating opportunities for bilingual children's engagement with print in ways other than English book reading. The literacy activities in which the children were most engaged did not overrely on children's understanding of English. Instead, the children were free to use their native language or English. In addition, the nature of the activities themselves often involved multiple modalities (touching, cutting, thinking, writing, reading, listening, seeing, modeling). Through their interactions with print, the children demonstrated that they were acquiring literacy skills, checking on what they knew about print and language with what they were seeing. In addition, the children in this classroom with its emphasis on multilingualism demonstrated an emerging awareness of different languages, different conventions of print, and different concepts about print.

Findings from this study should be of interest to researchers and teacher educators interested in defining alternative classroom activities that teachers can use to promote children's emergent literacy development. In addition, by focusing on understanding the emergent literacy

development of bilingual children, we can begin to test the extent to which storybook reading is a key component of every child's emergent literacy development. Further research needs to investigate the extent to which bilingual children from diverse cultural backgrounds participate in parental/child storybook reading. We also need to know more about bilingual preschool children's participation in teacher/child storybook reading when teachers use predictable text and effective storybook reading practices.

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